

December 16, 2018

The Gifts of Christmas

The Gift of Joy

Matthew 1:18-25

Opening words: They say in the third century, a man was anticipating his own death. In the last few days of his life, he penned these words to a friend: "It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered a quiet and holy people who learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any of the pleasures of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their own souls. They have overcome the world. These people are Christians – and I am one of them." I hope you are one of us! That ancient Christian understood the true meaning of Christian joy. The question is, do you understand the true meaning of Christian joy?

This is sermon number three in my five-part sermon series, *The Gifts of Christmas*. We are looking at the gifts God has given to us in Christ. God's gifts will not go out of style or break. They are eternal, spiritual gifts that come to all true believers. We are reminded of them annually, as we light the Advent candles. We began two weeks ago. We looked at the gift of hope. Last week, we looked at the gift of love. Today, we look at the gift of joy. Our scripture lesson for today is Matthew 1:18-25. Let me call this message *The Gift of Joy*.

Matthew 1:18-25 ¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Pope Francis (born 1936) once said, "*Christmas is joy, religious joy, an inner joy of light and peace*". I have wrestled with that quote all week. I believe the Pope is right! If you find some truth in that quote, say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the very first chapter of Matthew. The disciple and former tax collector is very clear. He is almost blunt in his proclamation. *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.* He then goes on to give us the information we have covered in the past. It has become redundant. Jesus's mother, Mary, was pledged, or engaged, to a man named Joseph. They never had sex, but she is pregnant. The father of this unwanted child is God Himself. The child came through the Holy Spirit. Our scientific world has a hard time with the virgin birth. Joseph had a hard time too. The scriptures tell us, he planned to end their relationship quietly. However, it never happened, because of a dream. In that dream, an angel tells Joseph to take Mary as his wife and name the baby she is carrying, "Jesus".

Names are important in the Bible. The name Jesus is related to the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "to save." To underscore the significance of Jesus's name, Matthew quotes the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. To be more exact, he quotes Isaiah 7:14, *The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel.* Matthew gives us the meaning of Immanuel. It means "God with us." If you combine those two names, Jesus and Immanuel, then you discover Jesus's mission. *The Savior is always with us.* That is a great part of the Good News. Life may not always be easy, but the Savior is always with us. That piece of the Good News should comfort you. There has never been a moment in your life when you were orphaned. The Savior, or God, has always been with you. Biblical joy does not mean happy laughter, biblical joy means comfort and contentment. The Apostle Paul understood the meaning of Christian joy. He wrote to the Philippians while incarcerated in Rome. Do you remember this verse from the fourth chapter? *Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say rejoice. ... The Lord is at hand.* If you are thankful God is with you, say, "**Amen!**"

When I was in the Cleveland area, I had an inactive parishioner. I do not remember her name, but I do remember the day she called me. She wanted to talk to me about some problem she had in her life. I told her I wasn't a counselor, but I would be glad to be her friend. On the day of her appointment, she came. With emotional words, she told me about her problem. When the emotions had passed, she thanked me for listening and told me how much that church meant to her. Those words surprised me, because she was inactive. So, I asked her why. "If this church means so much to you, why don't you attend worship?" Her response almost made me laugh out loud. She said, and I quote, "I don't come to church because I don't want to be the only one with problems." I almost said, but I didn't, "Are you serious?" One of the things I have learned in my position is, everyone has problems, including me. There is no shortage of problems in this world and there is no shortage of problems in this church. If you think you are the only one with problems, then you are simply a fool. No one escapes the storms of life. One of the reasons we come to church is to remind ourselves that God is always with us. That reminder helps us survive one more day. Let me ask you this question:

Have you ever had a health problem? I'll bet the answer is yes. Sometimes, it is our self. Sometimes, it is a family member or a loved one. Sometimes, it is a neighbor

or a co-worker. Every Sunday morning, I stand up and ask for prayer concerns. The one issue we feel we have the license to articulate is our health issues. Every week, it is something new. We hear about hip and knee surgery. We hear about bypass surgery. We hear about cancer, and we learn about conditions and diseases that are completely new. We pray for those people, and we are afraid we are going to be next. Have you ever wondered, what is going to get you? Have you ever had a health problem? I cannot eliminate your health problems, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you and God is bigger than your health problem. And, all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you another question.

Have you ever had an economic problem? Let me state the obvious. Life is expensive! Did you know, according to the Federal Reserve, the average American household is \$137,063 in debt and has a household income of only \$59,039? Can I ask you a question? How far in debt are you? I have said it a million times. Money makes a wonderful slave, but a horrible master. I can't eliminate your economic problems, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than your economic problem. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you another question.

Have you ever had an addiction problem? According to the Washington Post, alcoholism is on the rise. Did you know one in eight Americans is an alcoholic? They also tell us that 25 million Americans use drugs illegally. Has your family been affected by an addiction? Have you been affected by an addiction? I can't help you with your addiction issue. There are some things you must do for yourself. However, I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than your addiction issue. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Have you ever had a relationship problem? Albert Einstein (1874-1955) once said it best: *Physics is easy, relationships are complex!* How many complex relationships do you have in your life? How many family members won't you talk to this Christmas? How many children will have two Christmas dinners, one with dad and the other with mom? It is not supposed to be this way. I can't eliminate your relationship problems, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than your relationship problems. And, all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you another question.

Have you ever had a problem with religion? There are five major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. 1.1 billion people in our world have no religion. They are agnostic or atheists. How many people do you know who are not Christian? If you believe Jesus is your only hope of salvation, then how do you view those individuals' salvation? Aren't you glad you aren't the judge? I can't eliminate your religion problems, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than your religion problem. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Let me ask you another question.

Have you ever had a problem with anxiety or depression? Did you know over 18% of Americans deal with anxiety? Another 6.7% of Americans suffer from depression. It is important to take your pills, because 44,000 Americans commit suicide annually. Do you know of anyone who is crippled by anxiety or depression? Are you crippled by anxiety or depression? I can't eliminate your anxiety and depression problem, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than your anxiety and depression. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Let me ask you one more question.

Have you ever had a problem with death? Did you know approximately 275,000 people die every day? You must know someone who has died recently. Have you ever stayed up at night worrying about your own death? I can't eliminate your death problem, but I can remind you, you are not alone. God is with you, and God is bigger than death. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" As disciples of Jesus Christ, we embrace the name Jesus, our Emmanuel. Every time we utter his name, we are reminded our Savior is always with us! The problems of our lives are temporary, but our Savior is eternal!

They tell me, in Columbus, Ohio, there was a teacher by the name of Phyllis Martin. She has many stories from her years of teaching, but one story stands out. It was the day a storm came to her school. The clouds were black, and the wind was violent. Everyone, both teachers and students, were glued to the windows, until the signal was given that a tornado was near. Frightened, the teachers and students filed into the school basement. They lined the walls and listened to the storm outside their building. The tension was thick and some of the children began to cry. The principal tried a sing-along to distract the children, but it failed. The storm kept raging. It was then, Phyllis Martin did something you aren't supposed to do in a public school. She grabbed the little girl's hand next to her and said, "Cathy, God is bigger than this storm. Let's pray that God protects us!" She prayed with Cathy and the sound of her voiced resonated throughout the entire basement. Soon everyone was praying, and the crying stopped. A couple of minutes later, the storm passed, and everyone was at peace. They knew everything was going to be fine.

It is not just a story about a teacher in Columbus, Ohio. It is our story. Our lives are full of storms, but God is bigger than the storm. In the face of the storms, we stay calm, because we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We know we are not alone. God is with us, and God is bigger than any storm. Jesus's name was his mission statement. The Savior is with us! That is the heart of Christian joy. Do you remember the quote from Pope Francis? He once said, "*Christmas is joy, religious joy, an inner joy of light and peace.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"